

Anthropological Work and Legacy of Sidney W. Mintz

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Sid Mintz died in his early nineties on December 27, 2015. He was still writing books and as feisty as ever. Some of us knew him for decades. Some knew him for just a few years and in more limited ways. I write as one of those who knew him for decades. We were his students and his colleagues, some at Yale where he taught into the mid-1970s and some at John Hopkins where he taught until he retired at the age of 78.

Many came to a day of celebration of his life held at Johns Hopkins University in April 2016, and many also came to a Special Event we held at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association that same year (2016). His books have been reviewed and debated, and some wonderful obituaries have also appeared since his death [1]. Here I want to reflect on his life, his work, and his legacy as an anthropologist, where he fit in, where he didn't and why, and why some of us are still proudly Mintzian, even when we study neither food nor the Caribbean.

Sid (as he always wanted to be called [2]) was many things. He cared a great deal about teaching and he taught both undergraduates and graduate students with intensity, thoughtfulness, feistiness, effectiveness, humor, and expectation. I think that one of his greatest regrets about retiring from his faculty position at Johns Hopkins University was that he would no longer be teaching courses, especially to undergraduates. While many academics retire in order to not have to teach regular courses, Sid happily taught well into his 70s, and his students and former students often thought of him for years as their teacher and mentor. One (Dr. Drexel Woodson who was actually in my undergraduate class at Yale

but went on to graduate school at the University of Chicago, not Yale or Johns Hopkins) wrote the following for his memorial event April 23, 2016:

I knew Sid for 46 years. In September 1969, I laid eyes on him in “Anthro 20,” a four-field introduction to anthropology for Yale University undergraduates. The award-winning course that he had by then taught for 18 years was my first anthropology course. We met after class one November day and began weekly chats, usually over beers. Sid became my undergraduate advisor, inspiring and shaping my interest in anthropology, especially the cultural/social kind, as a discipline and profession until graduation in 1973. While I slugged through graduate work at The University of Chicago (1974-1979), and labored over a dissertation project that took ten years to research and write up, Sid was my steadfast extramural mentor. After my academic career at the University of Arizona got underway in 1990, his mentorship continued, marked notably by a letter of recommendation that helped me jump the Continuing Status hurdle (a variant of Tenure and Promotion) in 1998. By then, I’d begun to call him “Teach.”

Over the years, Sid enthusiastically played his role as senior partner in our regular conversations—face-to-face or virtual by snailmail, email, or telephone. We talked shop and shop talk sometimes provoked heated arguments about anthropology (the discipline and the profession), about the Caribbean Region (in/for itself and on the world stage), and about Haiti and Haitians (present or past, peasant and non-peasant, Blacks and Mulattos, marketwomen and producers or consumers). Anchoring the conversations were our contrasting views of how, as anthropologists, to think about and, as men, to act on complex relations among culture, race, class, citizenship/nationality, gender, and power. Our arguments usually turned on whether one could or should rank material conditions and symbolic considerations as “forces” shaping the ways of this world. Often enough, we agreed to disagree about matters of principle (materialism versus realism, for instance) and the interpretation of facts. [3]

Sid was also a bit hard to predict. Drexel Woodson prefers the word mercurial, a term he attributes to former *American Ethnologist* and *Current Anthropology* editor and now former Wenner-Gren Foundation President, Dick Fox, who reportedly found Sid surprising in his political and ethical stances and action. But I still think of Sid as a bit hard to predict, both personally and intellectually. One example that comes to mind is from the spring of my Freshman Year at Yale. The student body had gone on strike in order to support anti-war efforts (at the time of the Vietnam War) and anti-racist activities (when a much-anticipated Black Panther trial was to be held in New Haven). Most of us in his big introductory course assumed that Sid would just cancel classes and give us all a passing grade. But we were wrong. Sid continued to lecture, explaining that we all had much to learn and that it would be better if we came to class. I don’t know how many students went to class. I didn’t. But I do know that he continued to lecture, even when many of us were being tear-gassed on the streets of New Haven and surprised that he wasn’t visibly supporting our strike. Over the years, as an academic anthropologist, I have thought about his choice each and every time I have been confronted with a similar experience. It would have been easier, for sure, to have joined his students and not given his lectures, but Sid had standards and they mattered to

him as much as anything else.

To those who knew him, Sid was funny, warm, and indeed exacting. He had much to say about colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, expansionism, and racism, and he lectured often with those in mind (though never without evidence). He was both demanding and modest, patient and impatient, unsure of himself (especially relative to certain anthropologists he held in high regard, like his long-standing and close friend Eric Wolf, now deceased, and his friend Marshall Sahlins) and quite sure of his views and approaches. He was a Marxist but, like Marx himself, he was quite a serious scholar and this meant that he took Marx's approaches as things to emulate but not to mimic.

Over the course of his long life, he wrote many articles on the rural proletariat, sugar cane workers, Puerto Rican sovereignty, food and cooking, and the legacies of slavery in the U.S. and the Caribbean. He was proud to be an anthropologist but also proud to take history seriously and to have friends and colleagues in many varied fields and professions, including sociology, nutrition, history, philosophy, music, law, literature, agriculture, and carpentry. Sarah Hill (2016) noted his comment about both anthropology and history in his best-known book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (which first came out in 1985 when he was already in his 60s). Sid wrote: "Though I do not accept uncritically the dictum that anthropology must become history or be nothing at all, I believe that without history its explanatory power is seriously compromised. Social phenomena are by their nature historical, which is to say that the relationship among events in one 'moment' can never be abstracted from their past and future setting."

Many people now think of him as the author of that book—*Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*—and that is the book of his that most colleagues in both anthropology and history make their students read. They are not wrong in seeing its importance, as Sarah Hill (2016) explained in her remarkable obituary:

Published in 1985, *Sweetness and Power* accounted for New and Old World histories, the rise of Atlantic slavery and industrialism, and more than five hundred years of elite and plebeian tastes, folding them into one easily digestible confection. *Sweetness and Power* explained how we live—how world market systems shape taste and vice versa—in ways that no previous book had managed. It became a powerful model for how to write history, not through great men or great events, but through fungible, ubiquitous commodities and the freightedness of taste. Without Mintz's slim volume, it is hard to imagine the careers of many other writers who have copied his mystical formula for revealing the weight of the past on the present: all the world in a grain of sand, sugar, salt. One of the tricks of history is that extraordinary things can, in time, become commonplace. Mintz showed us how to see them as extraordinary again.

But others prefer to think of him as a very influential and multi-faceted Caribbeanist, which he always was and which he clearly was between the late 1940s and the late 1970s. These colleagues immediately think of his 1960 book *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History*,

which featured Taso, a sugar cane worker and union activist and, most importantly, his legendary friend since the days of his doctoral fieldwork in southern Puerto Rico. And they no doubt also think of his 1974 book called *Caribbean Transformations*, which gathered many essays of his on slavery, race, land, and labor but which were first published elsewhere. Many may also remember his writings/articles and a published Congressional testimony on the status of Puerto Rico. This may be less well-known outside the island, but it was significant to Sid, his critics, and his many friends and colleagues in Puerto Rico.

Many others, nonetheless, think of him as the pioneer anthropologist of food and food studies, starting perhaps with *Sweetness and Power* but continuing in more visible ways with *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (published when he was already in his mid-70s). *The New York Times* obituary on December 30, 2015, highlighted this part of his work, at least in its byline. It said simply: “Sidney Mintz, Father of Food Anthropology, Dies at 93.”

I have been told by somewhat younger former students of his that I was always his favorite former student or at least one of his favorites, and that both honors me and nearly paralyzes me. He was a wonderful undergraduate mentor, in much the way Drex Woodson describes him, but I was always trying to live up to his expectation and am not sure I ever did. When Sid asked me if I would be a Mintz Distinguished Lecturer in 2009, on the eve of my becoming President of the American Anthropological Association, I was flattered but also very nervous, as then AAA President Seta Low no doubt remembers. I would be (and was), as Sid told me, his first former (undergraduate) student to be chosen as Distinguished Sidney W. Mintz Lecturer. Many distinguished anthropologists had preceded me—from Eric Wolf to Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Paul Farmer. And many had chosen to use the occasion to discuss topics or areas of research they cared about and that had something explicit to do with Sid’s own work and writings. Eric wrote about power, Paul about structural violence, and Nancy about making anthropology matter.

I took a different path. I chose to think about what I had learned from Sid Mintz both as an undergraduate and later as a professional anthropologist. My emphasis was neither on the Caribbean nor food, and neither on labor nor on history itself (though I learned to value and do archival and historical work over the years because Sid thought it was important for anthropologists to put things in historical perspective). I focused on people doing things, on becoming aware of writing, and of staying away from assigning to culture the agency many other anthropologists (especially U.S. cultural anthropologists) have often given “culture.” I was, in many ways, focused on Sid the man, Sid the person, and Sid the scholar, including the many ways he was (and was not) a U.S. cultural anthropologist.

Sid was, after all, a maverick. No one today would be surprised by this. As *The New York Times* obituary put it that late December day in 2015, Sid “had stretched the academic boundaries of anthropology beyond the study of aboriginal peoples. (He joked about those who believed that ‘if they don’t have blowguns and you can’t catch malaria, it’s not anthropology.’),” and he did this even before publishing *Sweetness and Power*. Sid feared that many anthropologists in the U.S. missed the mark by focusing on culture or on symbolism. He feared that these were

often treated as timeless— even as unchanging—by anthropologists who did not take history seriously. And he was quite adamant that material conditions were important, and never secondary, to any analysis of people, a community, a language group, or any other way of thinking of people and their varied forms of social organization.

Likewise, Sid was often mad when some of his colleagues in the U.S. would send their graduate students to experience fieldwork in the English-speaking Caribbean because, as he put it, they thought it was easy fieldwork and good preparation for allegedly worthier anthropological fieldwork in really difficult places like Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, or central Africa. He often said that it was, in fact, harder to study a place that seemed familiar than to study a place that seemed very unfamiliar. He always pointed out that familiar places lulled anthropologists into complacency, that is, into not digging deep enough, because they made mistaken assumptions and didn't realize they were making them.

This attitude was, of course, not just his own, but it would be unfair not to add that he also embraced it. He was encouraged to pursue certain work at Columbia University in the late 1940s, at a time when many young people were returning to the academy in the U.S. once World War II was over. Julian Steward, one of Sid's teachers [4], imagined a project that was quite a departure from anthropological work of its day, though not a departure from the kind of anthropology he wanted people to pursue. [5] It was based on Steward sending various graduate students out to do their doctoral dissertation fieldwork in Puerto Rico, not because he thought Puerto Ricans were tribal, exotic, or bearers of cultural traditions he wanted to highlight but because the island was neither small nor large and several different crops seemed to demand different types of production and social engagement. Sid was sent to a sugar plantation area, whereas Eric (Wolf) was sent to a coffee growing area, and much of their later work followed suit. Sid, like Eric, did not just continue with that work over the years but production, labor, a legacy of slavery, the international market for sugar, and the ever-expanding industrial and consumer capitalism Sid saw and mapped in his work all had their roots in that early work in the late 1940s.

Sid Mintz saw himself as the intellectual grandson of Franz Boas, and not just because he went to graduate school in anthropology at Columbia University. To Boas he attributed the importance of historical research, local evidence, and materiality. I don't think Sid and Boas thought of materiality in the same way, but Sid appreciated Boas and his meticulous research. Sid never studied with Boas, because Boas had died by the time Sid began graduate school at Columbia, but he studied anthropology with many of Boas' students and students' students—especially people like Ruth Benedict (who had studied directly with Boas) and Julian Steward (who had studied at Berkeley with Boas' students Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie). Sid was much like them—both Boasian and not so Boasian.

Sid was independent, a thinker's thinker, and a courageous anthropologist. He had gotten pats on the back from his mentors, his parents, and his friends for all of those, and he passed them on to his students as well. He was often not quite at the center of things, by choice, I should say, and not by happenstance. He did not stray far enough to be seen as eccentric,

irrelevant, or illegible, but he clearly made choices in his life that reflected this approach. He had, for example, gone to Brooklyn College (a popular choice at the time for smart young Jews from the New York area, though he had himself been born in New Jersey) and he majored in psychology (and not anthropology, history, or food science), but he went on to graduate school in anthropology after the war. At Brooklyn College, he became an avid varsity wrestler (indeed an athlete but not in a revenue sport). He loved cats (and not dogs) all his life. He served in the U.S. army during World War II, and was clearly not a pacifist, though he did think that the anti-colonial struggle against the French in southeast Asia deserved support and not the military intervention pursued by both the French and the U.S. governments. He came from the working class, did not take college or graduate school for granted, and was unabashedly Jewish (but always secular and progressive in his politics). He was also, in some important ways, an admirer of women as thinkers and politicians, even though I doubt he or anyone else would have ever called him a feminist.

Ruth Benedict was indeed one of his key teachers and influences, but it is how he talked about his parents that I remember most vividly. Sid would talk about his father as a line cook and later as a diner owner, and he would talk about how he learned to savor and think about food from his father, but he thought of his mother as the smart one, the political one, and the one he always had in mind when he wrote. She had, he would say, not many years of formal schooling but she was deeply involved in union politics and, if he couldn't get her to understand something he wrote, he always considered it to be his fault, not hers. Clarity mattered a lot to him and he was convinced that we should all write with people like her in mind, and not for each other.

Of course, he edited my 300-350 (double-spaced) page Scholar of the House (undergraduate) Thesis practically line by line, and I learned a great deal about writing by noticing what he had done with the sentences I had in my draft. [6] I was not a native speaker of English, so I was not offended, but it clearly left a legacy I am happy to carry on. I realized years later that at my best I write like him, maximizing readability and having little patience for writing that only academics can read. But I also learned that this line-by-line editing took him hours to do and I realize in retrospect that he never once complained. I doubt I ever thanked him enough, but I hope he realized that I was following in his footsteps when I became Editor of *American Ethnologist* (a role I played with pleasure and dedication from 2002 to 2007). [7]

As I grew up, I also came to realize how kind he was, a fact that many readers of his books and articles are not likely to know. I can think of many examples. For one, Sid got me invited to a conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the spring of my Senior Year in college. He sat very close to the front of the room as I gave a paper in that conference (my first ever), and he nodded appreciatively. [8] On that same trip, he invited me to ride down with him to Ponce to meet Taso (his long-time dear friend Taso, whom I thought of as Don Taso). It was an invitation I knew was very special, even though I was just 21 at the time. He had no reason to include me on that trip but he did. A third example was that he said nothing (or at least I remember no rebuke) when I told him and Rich (Price) a year later that I would stay in

graduate school at Yale and not transfer to Johns Hopkins, when they invited me (and a few others) to leave Yale and move to Hopkins with them. I am sure he was disappointed but he said nothing at the time, and he tried for many years not to show it. ✕

To be sure, and probably in a very Mintzian way, I tried to do my own work and make my own decisions, but I realize that in the back of my mind I often wondered what Sid thought or would think. One day in the 1990s, for example, he asked me if I would let The Johns Hopkins University Press come out with a new edition of my 1986 book, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. It was a book that Rutgers University Press had published but that at that point existed only in hard cover. I was deeply touched, and somewhat surprised, because I wasn't at all sure that he had liked the book. He did, of course, suggest that I might want to write a new Preface to the book, relating my work to that of others he thought I should mention or deal with. I said yes, but I wondered how much work he was imagining. Rutgers, however, said no, and decided to bring out the book in paperback on their own.

A second example was a comment he made sometime before or just after I ran for President of the AAA. He didn't say much, as I recall. He did say that his friend, Bill Sturtevant, had described the Presidential Address he had had to give as an odd thing, a genre of its own, and I got the impression that Sid thought Bill had found the entire experience of being AAA President unusual and even difficult. [9] But Sid said nothing else at the time, if I remember correctly. It was as if he were warning me that it was not likely to be a particularly enjoyable position.

Sid probably liked my choices more than I ever imagined, and it was probably always a good thing that I feared him at least a bit—or feared his standards—as a scholar and a teacher. He set the bar for me, and I think he always will. The issue is ethical as well as scholarly. It is a matter of concern but also of responsibility. Some anthropologists like to think of it as a matter of mutuality, but I think Sid made me think of responsibility, too, what I have sometimes called a *pragmatics of responsibility*.

Here is where that Mintzian ethic of being comes in—a kind of humanism amid a serious, critical, historicizing, systemic but always people-centered political economy or, to invert it with equal power, a kind of political economic analysis of people relating to each other qua people, if only the analysts and the power-hungry recognized their dignity, equality, and mutuality. It is in some ways a Mintzian version of DuBois' 'double-consciousness,' or dare I say the anthropologists' version of something that is taught and learned, that must be taught and learned whatever our individual preferences or orientations. We are not all the same but we do become anthropologists, I believe, by adopting two approaches simultaneously even if we background one more than the other in our work.

For example, my own comfort zone normally leads me to explore the geopolitical structures and inequalities that constrain people's actions and lives. Other anthropologists focus much more on the one-on-one, contextualizing processes but anchor their understanding in the

lives and relationships they come to know especially well in the field. From the outside we might look like different types of scholars, but I think that is a serious misunderstanding. I have learned from Sid—or what I call the Mintzian ethic of being—that noticing (the kind of strong noticing that is never casual) allows both types of research projects and scales and entails both directions. Anthropology without that kind of noticing risks dehumanizing people, ignoring constraints, romanticizing deeply unequal relationships and, worst of all, not seeing the big and small ways that some people are regularly left unseen and unheard.

Much of this appears explicitly or at least implicitly in many essays, books, and obituaries dedicated to him or about him and his influence. Clearly I was not alone in respecting Sid, valuing his scholarship, and even fearing him a bit. I want to end with words from the introduction to *Empirical Futures: Anthropologists and Historians Engage the Work of Sidney W. Mintz*, a very scholarly book published in 2009 by the University of North Carolina Press as a kind of Festschrift to Sid. George Baca, Aisha Khan, and Stephan Palmie edited the book and co-wrote the introduction. It is a substantial introduction that includes engagement with essays included in the book, including one I wrote and titled “Evidence and Power, Sweet and Sour,” but it is what they said in the middle of the introduction about him and his work that captures what I am trying to say here. They wrote:

This, of course, is the lesson that Sidney Mintz has taught us all along. From his earliest interventions, such as his critique of Robert Redfield’s “folk-urban continuum” (Mintz 1953) to his pathbreaking work on the role of finance capital and global markets in the everyday life and labor of rural proletarians (1956, 1959, 1960, 1974); his writings on the historical anthropology of Caribbean plantation slavery, peasantries, internal market-systems, and rural proletarians (1959, 1961a, 1961b, 1973, 1978); his critiques of world-systems theory (1977), empirically ungrounded imputations of “resistance” to subordinated actors and groups (1995), questionable uses of “creolization” (1996) and “transnationalism” (1998) in contemporary anthropology; and on to his magisterial study of the role of sugar in the making of the modern world (1985), Mintz has consistently dealt with questions of power and its conceptualization—not, however, by proposing abstract theoretical frameworks, or succumbing to what Cooper...calls disciplinary “bandwagon” tendencies...Instead, Mintz has always patiently built from carefully assembled ethnographic and historical data, thereby tracking—in Eric Wolf’s (2001) phrase—the “pathways of power” from observed social reality toward those larger structural configurations that may significantly shape, but never fully determine, the perceived “structures of opportunity and constraint” within which actors and groups struggle to imbue their lives with meaning and dignity (2009: 10).

Sid clearly had doubts about theory that did not make people palpable and central, and all of us who studied with him at one point or another in our lives felt that pull, and still feel that conviction, as his strongest legacy.

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[1] Most notably one by Sarah Hill in *The Boston Review*, which I quote extensively in this essay.

[2] I can recall a letter I got from him in the Fall of 1972 when I was in New York City doing my earliest bit of anthropological fieldwork under Sid's supervision. It was short. It simply said: "If you insist on calling me Mr. Mintz, I shall have to call you Miss Dominguez." And, of course, he had signed it "Sid." I was not quite 21 at the time, so I still remember how surprised (and indeed uncomfortable) I was. I should add that at least at the time at Yale faculty members were not called Professor X or Y, just Mr. (and, in the handful of cases where in those days the faculty member was a woman, Ms. Miss, or Mrs.).

[3] Woodson, Drexel G. 2016. Farewell to Sidney Wilfred Mintz (1922-2015), teacher, mentor, and friend. Prepared for "Memories and Recipes: The Sidney W. Mintz Memorial, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, 23 April 2016. Final version 30 March 2016. Unpublished manuscript. 3 pages.

[4] And the main editor of *The People of Puerto Rico*, published in 1956 by the University of Illinois Press.



[5] He had, after all, recently published *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution* (1955) largely advocating culture history and an ecologically based multilinear evolution.

[6] I called it "*The Middle Race*."

[7] After this period as Editor of *American Ethnologist*, I wrote an article for the journal *Iowa Journal for Cultural Studies* about writing and editing. Interestingly I called that "Wiggle Room and Writing." It was published on the journal's electronic Forum in early March 2009 and then published in the print edition in spring 2010.

[8] This later became my earliest publication, an article in *Revista Interamericana Review*, published in the Fall 1973.

[9] It was different in some ways when Bill Sturtevant was President. One big difference was that the presidential term at the time was just one year whereas mine was for two years. I did give the 2011 Presidential Address, which was later published in 2012 in *American Anthropologist* (subject to some editorial revisions).